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The Worse It Gets, The Better We Are

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The Worse It Gets, The Better We Are

Abstract

"It is the worst of times, it is the best of times." Sorry, Mr. Dickens, for the twist. But that's the way it is in the information business. The bad farm crisis has brought out the best in us.

The Worse It Gets, The Better We Are!

Joe Marks

"It is the worst of times, it is the best of times." Sorry, Mr. Dickens, for the twist. But that's the way it is in the information business. The bad farm crisis has brought out the best in us.

A survey of 45 land-grant university information efforts and the U.S. Department of Agriculture in April 1986 clearly showed that we can and do rise to the occasion.

Before I back up that statement with numbers, let me give you an overall reading. The survey respondents were generally well satisfied with their sources of information and with the resources to do the job, although a fairly large percentage had trouble finding enough time (but isn't that always the case?).

In personal conversations, I've heard more complaints about being super busy from colleagues across the country than I've ever heard before. That's probably due to a combination of the farm crisis, cuts in extension personnel and budget, and the information age.

When it comes to responding to crisis, though, we do a great job—we do even more than we think. Often the media use us as sources of information. We have all answered phone calls and urged our scientists and specialists to make media contacts (and vice versa). Many of us gave our experts special training in how to handle themselves with the media. Let's look at some numbers.

Those surveyed were asked to assess their farm crisis information effort during the previous 12 months. My first concern was to find out how well satisfied we are with the resources to do the job: financial resources, sources of information (our scientists and specialists, etc.), the number of people who do information work, and the time to do the job. We come out pretty well satisfied with all these. See Table 1.

The author is professor and news director at the University of Missouri, Columbia. He is president-elect of ACE and has been a member 22 years.

TABLE 1

How Satisfactory Were Your Job Resources?

	Very Satis- factory	Satis- factory	Neutral	Unsatis- factory	Very Unsatis- factory
Financial resources (budgets)	11%	54%	22%	11%	2%
Information sources	22	61	13	2	2
No. of information workers	7	52	24	13	2
Time to do information work	4	35	43	15	0

Sixty-five percent of the respondents said they were satisfied or very satisfied with their budgets; 83 percent were satisfied or very satisfied with their information sources; 59 percent felt they had enough people to do the job; but only 39 percent felt they had enough time. However, note that 43 percent were neutral regarding the time to do information work. In fact, time hits sort of a bell curve with 93 percent in the satisfactory-neutral-unsatisfactory range.

Let's look at media effort (Tables 2-5). About half (48 percent) of the respondents turned out between 11 and 50 news releases in the past year; a fourth (24 percent) produced 11 to 50 radio spots; a third (31 percent) produced 5 to 25 TV spots; a third (31 percent) produced 3 to 10 publications; and a fourth reported involvement in other information efforts: slides, posters, exhibits, meetings, advertising; and newsletters.

TABLE 2

News Releases

Number	(0-10)	(11-20)	(21-50)	(51-100)	(100+)
U.S.	37%	26%	22%	7%	9%
Northeast	80	10	10	0	0
South	15	62	8	8	8
West	60	10	30	0	0
North Central	0	17	42	17	25
DC	0	100	0	0	0

If you check these tables closely by regions, you will notice the biggest information efforts occurred in regions where the farm crisis is the worst. But that action—reaction formula doesn't hold true state by state. States with ample resources (budgets, staff) were able to do the biggest information job whether they had a farm crisis or not. Turning that around,

some of the states where farmers who are in great financial trouble also have pitiful budget situations and, according to the results of the survey, were unable to do the information job they would like to do. This happened most often in the South, a region where there is quite a range of rich to poor states.

TABLE 3

Radio Spots

Number	(0-10)	(11-20)	(21-50)	(51-100)	(100+)
U.S.	54%	20%	4%	7%	15%
Northeast	90	0	10	0	0
South	46	31	0	8	15
West	70	20	0	0	10
North Central	25	25	8	8	33
DC	0	0	100	0	0

TABLE 4

TV Spots

Number	(0-4)	(5-10)	(11-25)	(26-100)	(100+)
U.S.	65%	20%	11%	2%	2%
Northeast	90	10	0	0	0
South	62	23	15	0	0
West	100	0	0	0	0
North Central	25	33	25	8	8
DC	0	100	0	0	0

So, how do we rate the effectiveness of the media we use? See Table 6. Looks like we're well satisfied with the effectiveness of all the media. At worst, we're neutral. From everything I know about communications research, a media mix is probably the most effective for communicating information. And most of us use a mix.

How did we rate our information efforts? See Table 7. More than half of us are at least satisfied with our information effort.

Of those who rated our financial resources satisfactory or very satisfactory, almost 90 percent were satisfied or very satisfied with their information effort. Obviously, an adequate budget goes a long way toward helping us do the job we'd like to do.

TABLE 5

Publications

Number	(None)	(1-2)	(3-4)	(5-10)	(11+)
U.S.	43%	20%	9%	22%	7%
Northeast	80	10	0	0	10
South	31	23	15	31	0
West	60	30	0	10	0
North Central	17	8	17	42	17
DC	0	100	0	0	0

TABLE 6

Please Rate The Effectiveness of These Media

	Very Effective	Effective	Neutral	Ineffective	Very Ineffective
Newspapers	24%	59%	7%	0%	0%
Magazines	22	35	22	0	2
Radio	17	52	17	0	0
Television	15	39	22	2	0

In analyzing the response to "How do you rate your information effort?" I found only respondents from the South and West (and one in the Northeast) saying they were unsatisfied with their information effort. Those were also respondents that reported they were unsatisfied with their resources to do the job.

So what can we conclude from this? The answers lie at least in part in some of the personal responses I received from the survey.

Dale Harrison, Idaho: "The resources are unsatisfactory in the sense that if we had another full-time reporter and more travel money, we could do a much better job of covering the state."

Charles Voyles, Oklahoma: "We had four separate programs identified under the heading of farm profit push. These have been some of the most effective and satisfying programs I have been associated with in more than 30 years with extension."

Jerry Webb, Delaware: "Most of what we did was too little and too late. Our farm crisis is smaller than that of the Midwest, but our extension people tended to ignore the farm crisis until last fall."

TABLE 7

How Do You Rate Your Information Effort?

	Very Satis- factory	Satis- factory	Neutral	Unsatis- factory	Very Unsatis- factory
Total resources spent on effort:	17%	48%	17%	11%	0%
Effort spent identifying problems:	11	54	20	9	0
Effort spent identifying solutions:	11	46	24	11	2
Support by extension administration:	35	43	11	4	0

Jacqueline McGrath, Rhode Island: "Just call me 'disgusted in Rhode Island.' The poor record reflected here was not for lack of wanting to promulgate farm crisis information."

Don Springer, Texas: "Two communications specialists spent virtually an entire month conducting interviews with specialists to develop a packet of news items and radio tapes."

Meg Ashman, Vermont: "Evaluating effectiveness is a constant challenge. The fact that our news articles get published, in itself, doesn't necessarily mean they have a traumatic impact on readers."

Tom Byrd, North Carolina: "A lot of our effort has been spent answering questions from media—putting them on to stories, lining up sources, etc. The story has been selling itself."

Ron Daines, Utah: "While the importance of the farm crisis itself cannot be underestimated, we continue to address the concerns farmers would have even if there were no crisis, the idea being that our information efforts have always been aimed at helping the farmer be more productive and more profitable."

Wendy Douglass, Colorado: "Much time by specialists has been spent on the problems in the state, but most efforts in the last year were reactive rather than proactive. We have disseminated much information on farm rural stress and financial assistance."

Robert Neumann, Michigan: "We are continuing with our program and are receiving substantial monetary and voluntary help from agricultural organizations such as Michigan Farm Bureau."

Dick Lee, Missouri: "There was a lot of interest in this effort—a crisis in which nearly everyone we worked with was

highly motivated. Results were gratifying. Wish all efforts were assured of such cooperation."

Larry Whiting, Ohio: "Administrative support for information efforts at OSU is superb! We have ten new people, mostly on the news side. These are ten new positions! We have six newswriters and four in radio and TV work."

Ovid Bay, USDA Extension: "Meeting the crisis with hotlines, workshops, news, software (FINPACK), etc., may have been extension's finest hour that the public and politicians recognize and will remember."
